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Book review: The Electronic Reporter: Broadcast Journalism in Australia

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ALYSEN, Barbara (2000)

The Electronic Reporter: Broadcast Journalism in Australia,

Deakin University Press, Geelong, Victoria, 243 pp.

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We're rolling! From the minute you pick up the book, scan the Contents list and flick through the pages – whether teacher, student or practitioner of broadcast journalism – you'll know you've got just about all the angles covered in one bite here. This text contains an abundance of useful, easy-to-digest information.

The author stipulates that the book is intended to be a “practical guide to the practice of broadcast journalism in its widest sense and one that tries to give some context to broadcast reporting” (pp 3-4). It succeeds.

Barbara Alysen has deftly combined a training-manual style with a prosaic, anecdotal approach. And, as promised (p4), journalistic practice is not treated uncritically — the book also offers analysis, comment and critical evaluations that will provide good focal points for classroom discussion, or food for thought for the individual reader.

Where this text functions as a manual the information is often set out in tabular form, such as the section on how to throw to a soundbite (pp 111-113). Columns of tips are also scattered through the text (e.g. “tips on microphone technique” p 67), although unfortunately these are not identified in the list of contents. Diagrams (e.g. types of microphones, p 66) and flow charts (stages of a news story, pp 42-43) also help the uninitiated unravel the world of broadcast journalism. New ways of doing things are thus more easily identified and absorbed.

Alysen justifiably takes a few swipes at the media, backing up each one with examples, sometimes from print as well as broadcast. One such instance is where she deals with the vexed issue of public relations spin: “News often functions as an arm of the Public Relations (PR) industry, sometimes unwittingly, sometimes knowingly” (p 28).

The theory, the anecdotal, the critique and the practice have all been melded into a structure which makes an ideal teaching aid. It would be feasible to construct lecture schedules around each chapter topic, yet equally easy to draw from different chapters. For example, the first chapter (“Newsroom”) starts literally at the

beginning: what and who you see when you first set foot in a broadcast newsroom. The basis of the next chapter, “News sources”, is equally applicable to print or broadcast — focussing first on news values — but Alysen sets it in a broadcast context.

The author has chosen not to separate television and radio into their own discrete chapters as broadcast texts often do. Instead she deals with the different components of the broadcast news process in different chapters – e.g. “News gathering and packaging” (chapter 3), “Recording sound and pictures” (chapter 4) – and outlines how these tasks are carried out for each media within the respective chapters. For example, she uses a story on a protest rally about Sydney’s third runway to provide a radio ‘worder’ (i.e. a straight copy) version (page 35), followed by a television copy version (page 36).

She then gives explanations and examples of why and how this story might be expanded for radio news into any of three other formats: a “voicer”, an audio cut (or “cart”) story, or a “package”. This is followed immediately by the different television news formats for the same story (the television “package”, or a “reader voice over”). Such a structure is particularly good for teaching and learning because it enables direct comparisons to be made between radio and television styles.

The vital topics of law and ethics are covered in the final chapter, covering broadcast and print where necessary, but focussing on broadcast aspects where appropriate.

Given the many differences between print and broadcast, the book also contains an almost obligatory glossary. And, for those with an interest in broadcast media history, a time-line detailing “some key dates in the development of electronic news” has been included. It charts progress from the time the first Australian radio station went on air in 1923 through to something that has not yet occurred: the scheduled review of digital TV legislation in 2005 (pp 209 – 211).

There are a few minor shortcomings. In just a few places page layout is a little overwhelming, making it difficult for readers to zero in on what they’re looking for. Second, the book’s introduction states that it covers radio, television and online. While it quite thoroughly does this for radio and television, there is relatively little attention to online. However a table of lead sentences from 10 major online news organisations (pp 98-99) exemplifies the difficulties of attempting to achieve this: writing styles are quite different for different online organisations. And, on the positive side, there is a useful list of websites

Another small hitch is that examples throughout the book tend to be Australian – and south-east Australian at that. The law and ethics section is necessarily Australia-focussed. This is

excellent for Australian readers but will put international readers at a slight disadvantage. Nonetheless the concepts relating to the examples should be readily understood and overseas journalism programs will be able to incorporate locally appropriate lecture material on law and ethics.

Overall this book is impressive. Whether or not you know before picking up this book that the term, "Rolling!" is used by camera crews and radio journalists to indicate they're about to start recording pictures or sound, you're certain to have learnt quite a bit more about broadcast journalism by the time you've finished reading it. I will be using it and recommending it. ■